# THE FORMING OF A METALHEAD: CONSTRUCTING A SUBCULTURAL IDENTITY

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## Abstract

This article will present the results of a research project that aimed to examine the meanings and mechanisms behind the formation of a metal identity. This report is based on 38 interviews that were conducted at four festivals during the summer of 2014. The article will investigate the ways in which the individual meets the social and the cultural meets the psychological in the context of metal identity forming.

## Introduction

With the spread of postmodernism into the mainstream culture some researchers proclaimed the death of subcultures (e.g., Muggleton, 2004, p. 61), which should now be replaced with styles and a loose sense of affiliation that Maffesoli called neotribal. However, the metal subculture is still alive and well. While some of the metal fans would rather fit into a broader term of a neotribe, Keith Kahn-Harris rightly argues for not discarding the 'subculture' term altogether (Kahn-Harris, 2007, pp. 18–19). The research, which was conducted by the Author during the summer of 2014 at a few metal music festivals supports the claim that the identities of metal fans are of subcultural nature. In this report a partial analysis of the interviews collected during the fieldwork will be presented. It will examine the impact that the time and context of joining the metal subculture has on the ways in which fans conceptualise their being metalheads. Then a generalisation about the fundamental ways in which collective metal identity functions will be made. Afterwards the stereotypes that make the identities of metal fans visible to the bystanders will be discussed. The article will conclude with an examination of less evident national differences between the members of the metal subculture.

### Data collection and processing

This report is based on 38 interviews with 72 people at four metal music festivals, namely Masters of Rock in Czech Republic, Metaldays in Slovenia, Brutal Assault in Czech Republic and Summer Breeze in Germany.

The interviews with the metal fans took place mostly on the camping grounds designated for the festival goers. The interviews were semi-structured: while there was a set of detailed questions, not all of them were asked, the order of the questions changed to match the conversation flow and the questions were sometimes formulated differently to adjust to different levels of proficiency in English. Also, additional questions were asked and alternative views to those of the interviewees were cited to encourage fuller explanations of their stances.

The answers to each of the questions varied from single sentences to long elaborations and the total interview time varied from ten minutes to an hour and a half for a single person. The interview length depended on many variables, including personal dedication to metal music, fluency in English, level of trust towards the interviewer (which seemed to be higher in case of group interviews) and individual talkativeness.

For the purpose of this analysis the answers to each of the relevant questions were reviewed and summed up to highlight the most crucial ideas. Then the summaries were grouped to check for any possible correlations between different factors.

## The dedication to the subculture

The interviewed metalheads showed a great consistency in their dedication to metal music. The majority of them have been heavy metal fans for at least eight years, with one metalhead, aged 56, having listened to metal music for 40 years. This is in stark contrast to the idea of postmodern neotribe that should be characterized by a high fluctuation of its members, low involvement and a lack of identity (Matysek-Imielińska, 2012, pp. 192–195). My interviewees showed also very high levels of involvement in the subculture, understood as either playing in a band, organizing concerts, selling merchandise or subcultural journalism. Out of 45 people who were asked about it only 14 said they have never been and never wish to be involved in the subculture in any way. 25 people were already involved or had been involved and six people hoped to become involved in the future.

As expected, almost all of the collected answers picture a positive to extremely positive image of the metal subculture. This comes as no surprise. Self-esteem is routinely noted as one of the most obvious reasons for maintaining a group identity (Deaux & Martin, 2003, p. 113). A closer look at those answers allows for a reconstruction of a generalized, and somewhat utopian, vision of the features a typical metalhead should possess. They should be tolerant, peaceful, sensitive, independent, helpful and strong. They can be intelligent or not intelligent at all, easygoing or introverted. They may be lonely outsiders with emotional problems, although some metalheads say there are no outsiders in the subculture nowadays. They should know the metal music well and feel it. They don't need to dress or look metal, but when they wear a band T-shirt, they should know the band well. They should listen mostly to metal, but they can still be metal if they know and like only one or two bands – however, in this case they are posers (these answers showed some variation). More than anything, a metalhead should be open-minded and authentic, that is they should not pretend they like metal only to be accepted by the subculture. They can come from any social background and any age group, but perhaps they tend to be better-educated and less religious than average. An authentic metal fan is a bit wilder than a normal person, likes to party, drinks beer and has metal friends. He or she ideally never stops being a metalhead, but remains faithful to the music and the subculture.

The negative comments regarding the metal community were far less common. They included observations that some of the metalheads can be aggressive and that there is some sexism, racism, Nazism and Satanism in the subculture (Satanism was usually portrayed as something negative).

The great number of collected positive evaluations of the subculture is a proof that the majority of the interviewees identified themselves as members of it

(Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 226). While the vision of a typical metalhead that arises from the various descriptions was certainly meant as a way to heighten the self-esteem of my respondents, it does point to a number of values that may be common for the whole subculture. Peter Burke understands identities as "defined by the set of meanings an individual connects to his or her self" (Large & Marcussen, 2000, p. 50). If this is truly the set of meanings that most metalheads associate with being a part of the metal subculture, then it surely is a very positive identity.

**Impact of the initiation context**

The relationship between the initiation to metal music and later metal identity development is certainly worth consideration. For the sake of this report, this relationship was evaluated based on the role that metal music plays in the subcultural identities depending on who introduced a given person to this music. While I sincerely doubt that any of my respondents who did not actually mention the music as an important factor constituting a metal identity do not genuinely enjoy the metal music, it is those responses that brought it to the forefront that are most telling of the dedication to it. Out of 16 people who introduced themselves to metal music with hardly any help from others, nine of them included music enjoyment in their description of being a true metal fan. In case of 16 people who were introduced to metal music by a relatively close person (classmate, friend, uncle or cousin), music was an important part of being a metalhead for seven of them. Out of people who were introduced to this music by their closest family (a group of 21), 14 put enjoying the music in their description. Out off nine people who started listening to metal under the influence of a group of friends, four of them thought of emphasizing listening to music.

While in all of these groups about half of the people mentioned metal music in their responses, when we take a closer look at these values, we can suppose, that metal music itself constitutes a relatively bigger value for metalheads from 'metal families', followed by people who discovered the music themselves. If this supposition is correct, it is because people who listen to the same music as their family are less likely to feel isolated at home. Therefore they will not seek out external sources of identification, such as a subcultural group. If they are identifying themselves as metalheads, it will be more likely it is because of the music. In case of people who sought out the music themselves, they are also more prone to become metalheads as a result of their discovery. On the other hand, people who become metal fans under an influence of a friend or a group of friends may do so because they seek to identify themselves with them and gain their approval.

**Impact of the joining time**

One of the most striking correlations to be observed between the answers to various questions is that between the age at which a person got involved with metal music and their perception of the people that form metal subculture.

People who started listening to metal music in their childhood (16 of my interviewees) generally emphasized the role of the accepting community to be experienced among the fans. Some noted that the music and the metalheads are not always that extreme or aggressive. There were also quite a few voices that paid attention to the intelligence and open-mindedness of metalheads. Therefore it is safe to say that the majority of people who became metal fans in

their childhood were attracted to the subculture because of its accepting atmosphere and still view it as a "huge family". While by no means restricted to childhood, these are the values that must appeal to a child that is most concerned with feeling loved by its family and safe. The perceived intelligence and open-mindedness may also be related to the children's curiosity. This is because intelligence was frequently described as paying attention to the lyrics or the music, while open-mindedness was understood as being open to other people, different views and new music and being ready to explore. Such description can, however, point to a stable personality trait rather than a characteristic of any stage of human development. This trait is sensation-seeking. Jeffrey Arnett in his study of heavy metal fans in the early 1990s discovered a disproportionate number of high sensation-seekers among adolescent boys that listened to metal music (Arnett, 1996, pp. 65–68).

People who started listening to metal music as teenagers (30 of my interviewees) were the only group emphasizing that metalheads are often social outcasts (seven answers), included rebelliousness in their descriptions (two answers) as well as noted radical ideologies as connected with parts of the metal scene (five answers). People who started listening to metal music as teenagers were also much more concerned with the metal dress code (five answers) and were the only group that connected drinking beer with being a metalhead (three answers). These differences between them and people who started listening to metal at other ages again may be related to their developmental status at the time their interest in metal music started. Being an outcast and rebelling can be descriptive of moratorium adolescents, who search for meaningful adult roles. This search is a source of great anxiety and also causes youth in moratorium to become very sceptical (Kroger, 2006, pp. 208, 212). Metal subculture is naturally attractive for people at this stage, particularly for boys, as a metal concert can be seen as a rite of passage (Arnett, 1996, pp. 16–17; Scheer, Gavazzi, & Blumenkrantz, 2007). Radical ideologies may be particularly attractive for people coming of age, thus their heightened visibility in the responses of people who at this stage got involved in the subculture. Some of them claimed that among metal fans there are not only atheists, but also Satanists, racists, sexists and anarchists. Drinking beer and dressing in a metal style, while having other meanings as well, are both important ways of gaining, at least superficial, acceptance of a group of young metalheads.

In the researched group there were only six people who became metal fans as adults. Their understanding of who a metal fan is was at times almost self-contradictory: the same person could glorify the metal community and later negatively stereotype some parts of it, e.g. one of my respondents described metal music fans as very sensitive only to tell me how some of them become aggressive after listening to thrash or death metal. The emphasis in this group was mainly on the knowledge of the music, but also on being authentic and on the dress code as important features that constitute an authentic metal fan. This group of metal fans seems to be varying their opinions by the application of the negative stereotypes of metal fans they were used to from before they started listening to this music on the one hand and the affirmation of their subculture and its fellow members on the other. Moreover, they conceptualise their participation in the subculture more in terms of it being a cultural movement than a community, as in the case of people who started listening to metal music as children, or youthful rebellion, as in the case of people who started listening to this music as teenagers. Because of it their social identity as metalheads is, more visibly than in other groups, based on the code of civility.

It is certainly illuminating to see how big the impact of the age at which a person starts to identify themselves with the metal subculture is. It seems to determine the very nature of their membership by defining the ways they relate to themselves, to other metal fans and to the cultural content of the metal subculture.

**The code of collective metal identity**

Eisenstadt and Giesen explain the code of civility as composed of tacit rules that regulate behaviour and include knowledge of tradition. This code of civility also determines in-group hierarchy, where those who are most knowledgeable are the most respected (Bokszański, 2001, pp. 102–104). Adherence to this code was also frequently demonstrated by the metalheads when I approached them to ask for an interview about metal identity. On many occasions I was delegated to persons considered to be the most knowledgeable and dedicated fans. If the person was a long-time metal scene member that held their identity and subcultural status particularly dear to their heart, they almost invariantly initially refused to be interviewed. Their friends, who suggested I interview them, then usually persuaded such a person to consent. After they did agree, they would prove to be the most eloquent and emotionally involved interviewees. This initial refusal to be interviewed should be considered a manifestation of the tacit nature of the rules that constitute the metal identity. Those who achieved a higher status in the subculture treat the knowledge and experience that make them a true metal fan as goods not to be shared with anyone; in fact, as goods that can be gained only through long term dedication to the subculture.

On the other hand, the tacit nature of the knowledge of rules that make one a metalhead, while a bit mitigated by the common acquaintance with metal music documentaries, made responding to some of my questions really difficult to many despite all of their good will. When I enquired about the stereotypes of fans of different metal subgenres that went beyond obvious differences in dressing style, 47 out of 55 people agreed that there are some differences. However, nine of them admitted that they are hard to describe and only 31 of them gave some descriptions of the perceived differences. This observation is also consistent with Znaniecki's concept of culture's centre, which is made of an axiological-normative structure of cultural values that doesn't need to be consciously acknowledged to function (Szwed, 2003, p. 52). This may also be so because the metal subculture lacks what Talal Asad calls an authoritative exegesis, which means that while the symbols are known to all, their interpretations may vary (Asad, 1993, p. 61).

However, the metal subculture's collective identity also has many traces of the sacredness code. Eisenstadt and Giesen describe it as a code that makes a social group assume that they have a special relationship with the sacred – in this case, with the almighty metal music. However, an outsider can become part of the group after conversion. The group can approach the outsiders, who are by definition of lower status, as missionaries. To maintain hierarchy within the group, there are certain communication barriers or taboos (Bokszański, 2001, pp. 104–105). Since we are discussing a SUBculture here, the group's sacredness is maintained by the symbols borrowed from the dominant culture, which should be identified broadly as Western European. The clothing style of the metalheads creates boundaries that separate them from the rest of the world, which are all the stronger by having religious connotations. Black, the most popular clothing colour among metal fans, traditionally is the colour of

sacrum (Leach, 1989, p. 65). Long hair was a visible sign of a person who was consecrated to God in the ancient Jewish culture, and later was a sign of penance or disobedience in Christian Europe (Biedermann, 2001, pp. 409–410). On the other hand, shaving your head was a sign of mourning in Judeo-Christian culture (Kopaliński, 1997, pp. 469–471), and its connotation with death seems to have lasted long enough for the style to be adopted by some death metal fans.

Because of the increased availability of the knowledge necessary to acquire "civilised" status, the code of civility seems to be superseded more and more by the code of sacredness. This is owing to the rise of the Internet where there are growing numbers of subculture members willing to share their knowledge of what metal is all about, like the *arbiter elegantiarum* who used to instruct the newcomers how to avoid being judged a poser at That's Not Metal site ("THAT'S NOT METAL," n.d.). People who are instructed on their way to become a true metalhead are more likely to help others out as well.

**The stereotypes**

The impact of the stereotype of metal fans that permeates the dominant culture is hard to assess. Many of my respondents actively defended themselves against the stereotype of metalheads being dirty, violent, evil or satanic and 'acting strong'. This stereotype also consists of more neutral characteristics, such as that the metal fans are social outcasts and are dedicated to their music. Apart from the "evil" part of the stereotype, which had to be denied to maintain a positive image of your own group, I came across people who accepted each of those features as descriptive of the metal subculture or even of themselves. Two of my respondents even recalled the stereotype that other people have of metal fans as their response to my question. A black metal fan admitted that it is the inaccessibility and opposition of the subculture that attracts him (16.08/1.m1). One of the more insightful respondents concluded that people who already have certain beliefs can be drawn to metal music (13.07/1.k2). The stereotype may attract them and they in turn support the stereotype.

The negative stereotype itself is in large part a result of metaphorical association. This means that the visible physical traits are projected to the character traits that are metaphorically associated with them (Zebrowitz, 1999, p. 96). Black being correlated with dirt (Leach, 1989, p. 65), leather jackets and tattoos with delinquency and satanic symbols with, unsurprisingly, Satanism, it is no wonder how the stereotype was created. The process of metaphorical association seems to be taking place also in the process of creation of the stereotypes of fans of different subgenres. Because folk metal sounds happy, this happiness was once associated with all the fans of this subgenre (23.07/1.f2). Grindcore and death metal fans were once associated with a preference to talk about gory things (23.07/4.m2). This idea must have resulted from a superficial knowledge of the subject matter of the lyrics in those subgenres.

There is also some functional association, that attributes certain features to fans of metal subgenres based on the functions of objects they wear (Zebrowitz, 1999, p. 96). One of my respondents thought pagan metallers like to drink together, probably because of them often wearing drinking horns, that could be associated with communal libations (12.07/1.m). However, most of the descriptions of fans of different metal subgenres were based on insider's

knowledge – be it the knowledge of stereotypes common among other metal fans or conclusions based on their observations.

## National differences in the content of metal identity myth

While this is only a pilot study and its results may vary greatly from the actual tendencies, there are some styles of conceptualising being a metalhead that seem to dominate in the answers of people from different nationalities. Polish people seem to be more concerned with authenticity of metal fans, which they identify with the breadth of their knowledge of the music and consistency of their behaviour (nine out of 23 answers). The Slovenes tended to mention being good-natured (four out of ten respondents). British metal fans (in the number of four) were the most aware of the social dimensions of the metal subculture and emphasized the need to fight sexism within it. Metalheads from Germany, Austria and Switzerland seemed more convinced than the rest that metal music has some correlation with religious convictions, namely that metalheads are generally less religious (four out of 13 responses to this question). Another person from this group also noted that some metal bands are pagan or satanic. There were only three opinions that the metal subculture opposes or is indifferent to religion presented by people from other countries, two of whom were from the Czech Republic. The remaining four of the answers from the Czech Republic firmly contradicted them. People from this country also seemed to be more concerned with the lifestyle of a metal fan, which includes going to festivals, moshing and relaxing while listening to metal music.

Although the observed tendencies may not accurately reflect the actual differences in the content of the identity myths that structure the experience of metal subculture for people from different countries, it is quite obvious that the national cultures as well as social, political and economic context do result in variations of the metal identity. The regionalisation of the metal subculture and its division to local scenes has already been explored in a number of studies and documentaries (e.g., Bayer, 2009; Dunn & McFadyen, 2009; Hecker, 2012; LeVine, 2008; Purcell, 2003, pp. 16–23, 31; Wallach, Berger, & Greene, 2011). My respondents also had some observations about it. They told me that French metalheads are heavy drinkers compared to other nations (21.07/4.m2)[28], that Austrian metalheads are less outgoing than those in Germany, Czech Republic or Poland (11.07/3.m), that Germans are friendlier than Poles or Czechs (17.08/1/f1), that Czechs are more polite than Poles (08.08/2.m, 13.07/1.m2) and that Poles are the most dedicated and vehement of all the metal fans, particularly when compared with the Czech or French people (13.07/1.m1,f2&m3, 07.08/1.m1&f). At the same time, plenty of my respondents stressed, that these national differences did not impact the atmosphere of the metal festivals and that everyone there formed a huge family.

## Summary and discussion

To sum up, it seems that while metalheads generally arrive at a relatively cohesive positive identity myth, there are some noticeable variations to it. The variations may be related to the context in which they became metal fans,

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28 The codes in brackets refer to the respective respondents. They were construed by combining a few details regarding each of the interviews: "day.month/interview number.respondent's sex and number". Respodents were numbered based on their sexes.

which is directly related to the expectations they then had. Another significant factor that contributes to those differences is the impact of the national cultures of the metal fans, which may translate to stereotypes about metalheads from different countries as well as different emphasis on the relative significance of the features that constitute the metal identity and on the issues that the metal subculture has to deal with. More broadly, those differences also manifest themselves in the creation of regional scenes, that have already been researched by a number of scholars. While the stereotype of a metal fan that is known to the non-metal parts of societies in many countries is based largely on a very superficial association of character traits based on the appearance of metalheads alone, the mechanism, which compensates for the lack of more accurate information, is obviously less manifest in the subculture, where the knowledge of the in-group differentiation is generally good. However, no subgenre divisions seem to impair an overwhelming sense of community of all metalheads. The sense of belonging is so strong, that the majority of metal fans not only remain faithful to their subcultural identity for many years, but are also eager to commit themselves to actively create this subculture.

This article is but a primer that explores many different areas which impact the formation of the subcultural identity of metal fans. While attempting to cover different aspects of this process that need further exploration, it stands on the crossroads between the qualitative and quantitative studies by presenting a telegraphic summary of qualitative studies. The scope of this article did not allow for an in-depth analysis of particular opinions, nor had the underlying research collected statistically significant number of interviews. The quantitative study should, however, follow the qualitative research that allows for discovering important issues that may later be verified. Some of the issues that still need further investigation include the exact extent to which there are regional variations in the metal identity myths as well as the impact of age of a person and social context of the time of their introduction to metal music.

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